

40 WEEKS EARL BLUMENAUER #40 Disaster Recovery 40 IDEAS

Background

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, Congressman Blumenauer's thoughts are with the victims, those families who have lost loved ones or had to endure injury, property damage, and having their lives turned upside down. President Obama, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the governors and state governments up and down the eastern seaboard are to be commended. They took the challenge seriously and appear to have avoided much greater problems.

The same praise cannot be lavished on our national leaders – political, civic, and business – and their efforts to prepare for the inevitable. The rising sea levels that are predicted by climate change models suggest even more severe flood events. One telling example: since 1900, three of the top ten floods at the Battery in Lower Manhattan happened in the last two and a half years. The fact that people have failed to heed the warnings of the overwhelming consensus of the scientific community is shocking and disturbing. It's hard to imagine another circumstance in which advice of the experts, backed by overwhelming data and facts on the ground, would not prompt a change in policy and behavior.

Whether or not people believe in climate science, the pattern of extreme weather events including Hurricane Sandy – as well as the devastating drought that gripped much of the nation this summer - should inspire everyone to think and, more importantly, to act.

Solution

Providing relief to devastated families and communities is, of course, the appropriate first action. It is also an appropriate time to reaffirm the role of the federal government in disaster response, recovery and prevention. This should be a national priority. The unsettling notion that the federal government should not have FEMA responding to natural disasters and that instead response should be turned over to the states and the private sector betrays a fundamental lack of appreciation for the role of the federal government and the nature of natural disasters.

Natural disasters do not respect city boundaries or state borders. The massive expenses that are incurred for immediate relief – let alone rebuilding – are much more easily handled on the national level than placing this extreme burden on the community that suffers the loss. Damage, repair, and cleanup require larger scale responses than an overwhelmed and often understaffed community can handle. The national government can best plan, manage, and finance the immediate response and recovery and play a critical role in prevention as well.

The federal government should fund not just FEMA's accounts to respond to disasters, but budget for and look closely at Corps of Engineers projects, the National Flood Insurance Program, and even local building codes to take climate change and rising sea levels into account. A first step should be to change the way that we budget for these disasters. We need to invest more in mitigation, which can save \$4 for every \$1 spent. In addition, it makes no sense for our yearly budget for disasters to be based on past trends, as this leads to chronic underfunding. These massive storms are no longer "unforeseen," so it is Congress's obligation to budget for them in a responsible fashion.

Congress also needs to immediately proceed with reauthorizing and modernizing national preparedness programs. For example, the authorization for both the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program and the National Windstorm Impact Reduction Program expired three years ago. Failing to reauthorize these and other important preparedness and mitigation assistance programs puts homes, office buildings, bridges, and schools at risk.

It is important to emphasize that individuals have ultimate responsibility for themselves and their families. No amount of government preparation, regulation, education, and investment can substitute for a lack of judgment and planning on the part of individual families. Efforts to encourage responsible behavior at all levels of government need to be reinforced.

At the same time, it is vitally important that government itself not send mixed messages through policies that provide incentives for reckless individual and business behaviors. Federal

subsidies should not be used to put people in harm's way. Infrastructure investments that expand areas at risk or in some cases make the impacts of storms worse should be immediately stopped. An example is inappropriate beach fortification that can merely deflect some of the damage and make it worse for adjacent properties, while giving some sense of false security. Seawalls, dikes, dams, and levees are important fortifications against storms. If they encourage more risky development that makes the inevitable disaster worse when it actually comes, we are working against ourselves. Fortified areas that merely deflect the storm surges to remove other beaches and structures is questionable at best.

Planning for increasingly likely climate change related events and reforming our national budgeting and disaster policies need to begin now. There's no more important time to avoid the next disaster than while the memories are fresh and the evidence is clear.

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